

VZCZCXYZ0011
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #0877/01 3011914
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 281914Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0780
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 4747

UNCLAS RABAT 000877

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM MO
SUBJECT: PALACE PARTY SEEKS TO DOMINATE THE
MOROCCAN POLITICAL SCENE

REF: A. RABAT 0517
 1B. RABAT 0607
 1C. RABAT 0858

11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: In the short span of two years the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) has gone from being a loosely defined political association to a political powerhouse that dominated the June 2009 municipal elections. The PAM now controls the upper house of Parliament, and appears the favorite to win control of the government in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Founded and directed by Fouad Ali El Himma, one of the king's closest friends, the PAM is widely perceived to be the palace's party. Its critics argue that PAM is a step backwards for Moroccan democracy and is little more than an instrument (like many of its predecessors) created by the King to exert stricter control over the political process. Most vocal among these critics is the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which the PAM and the Palace have clearly sought to undermine. PAM militants, however, argue that their party represents a new and transformative force in Moroccan politics that rewards competence and initiative, and that will foster reform by forcing the entrenched political parties to compete for voters based on its ability to govern competently and democratically. This is a joint Casablanca-Rabat reporting cable. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND: THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF PAM

12. (SBU) Little more than two years ago Fouad Ali El Himma, a childhood friend of King Mohammed VI and a former palace official charged with overseeing the Ministry of Interior, founded a political association called the Movement for All Democrats (MAD). The MAD's stated goals were to invigorate discussion and bring new ideas to the political arena from outside Morocco's established political party structure. The association attracted a wide range of personalities from various backgrounds and included former political prisoners from the Hassan II era, prominent leftist activists, government technocrats, and a significant number of civil society leaders who had not previously been directly involved in party politics. The association marketed itself as an inclusive organization open to anyone who supported transparency and good governance -- with the notable exception of Islamists, whom MAD leaders made clear were not welcome.

13. (SBU) The MAD launched its effort to

reinvigorate Morocco's political discussion "from the outside" via a series of forums around the country. For MAD activists, a central talking point argued that Morocco's established political parties had become stale, complacent and self-serving. They openly accused prominent politicians of completely ignoring their duties to govern. Another central theme was the need to strengthen the Moroccan democratic process and overall good governance by drumming out of the established parties those politicians for whom the getting re-elected had become a self-serving and full-time vocation. Both arguments appealed to local officials, civil society activists and the leaders of small political parties, many of quickly sought to associate themselves with the MAD.

THE MOVEMENT BECOMES A PARTY

¶4. (SBU) In August 2008, El Himma took the step that many established politicians feared he would take: he converted his movement into an official political party. Dubbing it the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), El Himma bolstered MAD's ranks by incorporating five minor parties (which collectively held 26 parliamentary seats) into the PAM and by actively courting popular and/or influential members of larger parties. In February 2009, the party held its first national congress and elected officers. Early detractors quickly accused many of the party's new adherents of being

opportunists hoping to capitalize on the PAM's early popularity and on El Himma's royal connections. However, PAM supporter argued that the party welcomed all but only rewarded talent and initiative, citing the fact that some of the small party leaders who joined PAM early on were not elected to senior leadership positions. (NOTE: Most notably, Abdullah Qadiri, the leader of the National Democratic Party (PND), quit the PAM in a public row while most PND members stayed with PAM. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) In the lead-up to the June 2009 municipal elections, the PAM continued to attract defectors from other parties, including sitting Members of Parliament who changed parties and, in some cases, unaffiliated technocrats. The party garnered the support of people from across the political spectrum, including prominent members of the government such as Minister of Finance Salaheddine Mezouar of the Rally of National Independents (RNI); Talbi Al Alawi, the former Mayor of Tetouan who was also from the RNI; and Mohammed El Gaz, a former Minister of Youth from the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP). The PAM made a parliamentary alliance with the RNI that gave it the 70 votes it needed to form a caucus and hence access and influence in the parliamentary committees. Despite never having participated in a parliamentary election, the PAM quickly came to control two of the seven vice-presidential positions in the Parliament and the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and it now counts among its adherents two sitting Ministers.

PAM FLEXES ITS MUSCLES

¶6. (SBU) The PAM also took aggressive steps to recruit supporters in the June communal elections, which were widely viewed as a bellwether for its appeal among voters. Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi of the ruling Istiqlal (Independence) Party (PI) derided the PAM during the campaign as a "party of

kids" who had no right to dictate or criticize the country's leaders. Despite such bluster, the PI, ruling coalition-member USFP, and other established parties clearly feared the PAM's potential and took steps to check it. For example, they sought -- and failed -- to outlaw party-switching as their candidates and members continued to flock to the PAM. In the end, the PAM won over 20 percent of the seats in municipal councils nationwide, making it the obvious winner (Ref A). Through coalitions, its candidates also became the mayors of major cities, including Marrakesh, Tangier and Meknes (Ref B).

¶7. (SBU) The PAM continued its successes in the many rounds of indirect elections that, by law, follow Morocco's communal elections. It established itself as the dominant player in the upper house of parliament, captured the presidency of that chamber, and entrenched itself at the top or near the top of regional councils throughout the country. PAM militants like to claim that 80 percent of party activists come from a civil society and have little actual experience with party politics. However, the sophisticated alliance building and ruthless horse-trading that characterized and underpinned the PAM's strategy in these contests belied that "grassroots" veneer and attested to the party leadership's tremendous ability to manipulate successfully -- and legally -- Morocco's byzantine electoral rules (Ref C).

PAM AND THE ISLAMISTS

¶8. (SBU) Since its inception, the PAM has adopted a hostile stance towards the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD); has refused to participate in any coalition that includes the PJD; and has condemned those parties, such as the USFP, that have. Ali Belhaj, Second Vice President of PAM, told PolCouns and PolOff in a recent meeting that PAM seeks to undermine the popularity of the PJD which he characterized as a threat to Morocco's secular government and society. Belhaj insisted that despite its conciliatory rhetoric, the PJD

harbors dangerous Islamist elements who are intent on imposing their Islamic vision on Morocco.

THE NEED FOR A NEW PARTY

¶9. (SBU) PAM supporters argue that the King has a genuine vision for reforming Morocco and that he has taken significant steps to implement social, political and economic reforms during his ten-year reign. However, they continue, Morocco's established political parties have failed to rise to the king's challenge and expectations and have proven unable to lead the reforms he has sought. Indeed, the argument goes, the King has been left without a partner to implement his reform vision, given that the parties remain fossilized, antiquated and internally non-democratic institutions, with leaders who are simply intent on preserving the current system in which they benefit from the patronage of controlling most of the ministries. The prevailing perception that the current government of Abbas El Fassi has been somewhat ineffective in implementing reforms or efficiently governing has only reinforced the PAM's arguments.

¶10. (SBU) Hence the need for the PAM. The PAM, its members say, is indeed a palace-inspired party, but it was born from the king's vision to reform the system, not dominate it. The PAM will offer a

strong, transparent partner for the King as he seeks to create a more effective government. In addition, by introducing competition into the system and by forcing other political parties to recruit and retain young and competent members, the PAM will also inspire other parties, i.e., those that survive its rise to power, to implement internal democratic reforms and to join the PAM as coherent and hardworking parties to whom the King can truly devolve power. "Change in Morocco comes from the King. This is not a judgment but rather a statement of fact," Belhaj told PolOffs.

A DARKER VIEW

¶11. (SBU) In stark counterpoint to the PAM's own enthusiasm, critics contend that throughout Moroccan history, the Palace has created parties whose principal aim was to support and lend legitimacy to the monarchy and that PAM is no different. Parties such as the RNI, the Constitutional Union (UC), and even the PJD, began as palace ploys to balance, control, and manipulate the political system to ensure its uncontested central role. El Himma's proximity to the King and the PAM's rapid spread of influence to all levels of legislative power have thwarted any competition or political reform, rather than stimulated it, critics say. When the PAM takes control of the government -- an increasingly foregone conclusion among analysts -- it will lead to even greater alienation as many avenues for political opposition become restricted.

¶12. (SBU) Likewise, there are some who fear that the PAM's overt hostility toward the PJD could produce dire repercussions. Professor Mohammed Darif, a leading academic and researcher on Islamist movements in Morocco, predicted that the rapid emergence of PAM and the widespread perception of it as the palace's party would only strengthen the PJD and make it a more attractive alternative to those who oppose the policies of PAM or the Palace. He derided the PAM theory that the PJD harbors radicalized jihadists intent on turning Morocco into an Islamist caliphate, but warned that the PAM was targeting exactly the wrong type of Islamists, i.e., those who have openly agreed to participate in the Moroccan democratic process and to express their view legally from within the system. The real threat comes from "Salafist-Wahhabist" elements who reject any participation in what they consider to be an illegitimate political system and consider those who participate, including the PJD, apostates, Darif said. However, by weakening the PJD, the PAM (and by extension the Palace) risk strengthening the hand of these extremists who are committed to working outside the system.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) It is difficult to separate form from substance in Moroccan politics since there is little difference in the political platforms or ideologies of the many political parties. Proponents of the PAM correctly point out that Morocco's party system is ineffective. And their argument that the King cannot implement reforms without strong, capable political parties is convincing. However, the PAM's self-portrayal as the best instrument for such democratic reform is clearly self-serving and has yet to be tested. That test starts now, with the PAM having positioned itself as the force to be reckoned with in Parliament and at the head of

numerous regional and local governments. If it lives up to its promises to delivers good governance and renewed energy to the political process, the PAM could truly emerge after the 2012 national elections as a viable option through which the king's decentralization efforts can be implemented.

However, if it perseveres with the back-room deals that have contained the PJD over the last six months and/or becomes too much a victim of its own success, it could emerge as a de facto single party amidst a sea of weakened and alienated small parties -- not necessarily a positive scenario for Morocco's democratic evolution. END COMMENT.

KAPLAN